

Remarks of Ambassador Bleich at the National Student Leaders Foundation, Canberra

(As prepared for delivery – September 21, 2012)

Thank you, Jeremy, for that very generous introduction. I wish my mother had been here to hear it. I do need to correct a couple of things for the record. The day named for me in San Francisco isn't actually a public holiday. Everyone still had to go to work, including me. (Laughter). In fact, I think the only practical effect was that I got free parking for the day. (Laughter). Also, Jeremy is mostly – but not completely -- right that my experience in the White House was just like in "The West Wing" . . . the only difference is that our banter was much, much wittier. (Laughter).

I am very grateful for the opportunity to have been invited by you all to join my friend Shadow Minister Scott Morrison to address so many student leaders on the important question of the role that faith and values play in maintaining peace in our world. When I agreed to participate in this event a few months ago, unfortunately, none of us could have realized just how salient the issues of faith and values would be, particularly for those of us serving in the U.S. diplomatic corps.

Before speaking directly to these recent events, it may be valuable to step back and consider the things that keep us safe each day from conflict and violence. I have devoted my entire career to the peaceful resolution of conflict: first as a lawyer, and now as a diplomat. So I consider law and diplomacy critical ways to overcome our differences, and settle even our most profound disagreements without violence. But as important as law and diplomacy are to our world, they are merely there to provide a backstop for when the primary bond of our society fails.

Our security depends first and foremost on a shared set of values and beliefs: the belief that you value your life as much as I value mine; the belief that you love your family the same way that I love mine; and a conviction that you seek to live with dignity just as I do. It is these core beliefs that we hold – not because the law requires it or armies compel it – that is the ultimate source of our future security.

I practiced law for many years, and I believe that the law is a great force for good. But when we act consistently with the law, we do so in part because it is compelled by the state. Likewise, diplomacy is good, but it is done under the shadow of armies. But most



Ambassador Jeffrey L. Bleich – National Student Leaders Foundation

of our acts of consideration each day are not compelled, they are voluntary. We don't live by these shared values because we fear going to jail or being fined.

In this room, right now, no one has taken their shoes off to manicure their nails. (Laughter) No one has spit on the floor. No one has turned to face their back in contempt. No one came in undressed or unshowered. (Laughter) There is no specific rule that prohibits these actions, but we all would consider them rude. We don't even think of doing it — we know we'd be offended if others did it, and so we don't do it either. When we get behind the wheel of a car, we are placing our lives in the hands of every single person driving on the other side of the road. We trust that they won't cross that line and kill us not because of the law, but because we trust that they love their life as we do, and they love their families as we do.

Each time we pass a law, it should make us sad because it reflects something missing in our character. It means that the social codes that hold us together were not strong enough. We shouldn't need a law against littering; if everyone just picks up after themselves we leave the earth clean. When we have so much litter that we need a law to stop it, it diminishes us a little. That is true of all laws. When we have to pass laws against discrimination, pollution, and cruelty to animals, it means that too many of us, too many times, have failed to live up to our better selves. If our faith and values fully break down, there are not enough laws on earth to save us.

The same is true in global affairs today. We live in a complicated world with limited resources, and different nations with different cultures and traditions and languages are drawn ever closer together by technology. Conflicts and disagreements are inevitable. And yet, we have created large zones of peace and prosperity in this world through nothing more than good behavior and mutual agreements...not laws or force. Consider the border between the United State and Canada. The U.S. is a large nation with the biggest military in the world. Canada has a much smaller population and military and vast natural resources. (Laughter) And yet, neither nation fears or imagines conflict between our countries. In fact, every day we work with other nations to reach agreements, establish rules of engagement, and work with multilateral organizations to peacefully resolve disputes.

To me, one of the most compelling things about the U.S.-Australia relationship is not the number of the agreements we have signed into law, but how relatively few. Over 70 years, we have built the Australian-American partnership on common values that we share and by building trust and respect. Our first treaty, in fact, was signed only a little over 60 years, and it established the Fulbright Fellowships – an exchange of scholars between our countries. Our deepest bonds aren't legislated. They are things we do



Ambassador Jeffrey L. Bleich – National Student Leaders Foundation

naturally, agreements we reach voluntarily. They reflect a mutual pledge to work together to make the world better.

The great religions of the world, at their core, perform precisely this same function. They organize our natural sense of faith and values. The ability to share this perspective, to see the world as a place where we all benefit by taking personal responsibility to do our best, is not something that law can ever really create. It is something you need to learn, to experience, to allow to become part of your life, whether that comes from a foundation based on religion or personal moral code. In a world of billions of people, there will never be enough laws, guns, fences, or bombs to keep us secure. It is the social bonds – the idea that others will value our lives as much as they value theirs – on which our future rests.

We express our values, and we define our future together, on the choices we make every day in ways big and small: we make choices about the products we buy, how we heat our homes, the causes we support, the assumptions we challenge, and the leaders we elect. No one can legislate good answers to all of those choices. It has to come from within.

Today, as I look across the world's landscape as a diplomat, I see clearly our dangerous conflicts and the world's many challenges. I see Assad killing his own citizens in Syria, al-Qaeda terrorists plotting violence against innocents in Yemen, I see hunger in North Korea, threats and belligerence in Iran. And yet, I also see hope for all nations.

Part of my reason for hope has come over the past ten days. Since the tragic death of my friend, Ambassador Chris Stevens and his three colleagues, Sean, Glen, and Tyrone, I have been overwhelmed by the outpouring of affection that I have received from all corners of the globe. I have been especially moved by calls I received from Libyan friends and Imams who have expressed their appreciation for the work that Chris was doing in Libya when he was killed. I have heard people from all faiths condemn violence as a response to words, no matter how hurtful those words may be. This gives me hope. There is no doubt that in every country, in every religion, there are bad elements and people who seek to sow the seeds of violence and hatred. But, these elements exist on the fringe, and the vast majority of people wish only to live in peace, with the chance to make the world a better place for their families. And it is these expressions that strengthen our resolve to shake off our sadness, and return to pursue the difficult work of extending peace and stability in the world.

Faith and values are a critical part of this. While there is a tendency to focus on the things that divide religions and people, we are also made more secure by the shared wisdom of all the world's great religions: Honesty. Self-discipline. Respect for self and others. The importance of service. The necessity of charity. The understanding that the



Ambassador Jeffrey L. Bleich – National Student Leaders Foundation

way to address things that are unfair in our life is to strive to make the world more fair for all people.

These are the values that made me choose to serve my nation. And it is because of these values, that I can look around this room today and it gives me hope. It reminds me that our future is in the hands of people who would forego a beautiful day outside to come into a large, windowless auditorium to think seriously about faith, value, and the great human quest for peace. You would not be here if you did not share this faith. And we are lucky you do, because our world depends on it.